

MR. NOBODY

ANDY MARTIN IS REVOLUTIONIZING JOURNALISM*

*FOR THE WORSE

by Robert Moor

Despite all verifiable evidence to the contrary, doubt over Barack Obama's religious heritage lingers. The issue continues to reappear in the most unexpected places, arising less like the mythical phoenix than one of those bald randomized creatures in a Whack-A-Mole machine. Though the concern has taken many forms—the photograph of the Senator dressed in a Somali turban, the *madrassa* controversy, Republican Congressman Steve King's assertion that an Obama victory will prompt terrorists to “dance in the streets,” and, most recently, paperwork cited by certain PUMA members which purports that the Senator registered “Islam” as his official religion on school documents—its incarnations all stem back to a prejudicial fear among some Americans of electing a ‘secret’ Muslim candidate. More explicitly, some have argued that Barack Hussein Obama, Jr. poses the threat of becoming an Islamic ‘Manchurian Candidate’ who intends to destroy America from within.

Helping to fuel this rumor is a chain email—made infamous when a Clinton staffer resigned after forwarding it in December 2007—painting in short, histrionic strokes how Obama still harbors Islamic allegiances. The email asserts that Obama was educated in a radical Wahabist school, that he was sworn into office with the Koran, and (perhaps most childishly) that during the playing of the national anthem, the Senator “turns his back to the flag and slouches.”



It is nearly impossible to identify a specific genesis for something as easily and invisibly transmitted as a rumor. In the splintered, faceless, funhouse-mirror world of cyberspace, this uncertainty only becomes intensified. However, with regard to this particular rumor, it may be possible to sift through all of the distortions and false replicas to find some original kernel of authorship. It is strangely thrilling to think that perhaps we can pull aside the curtain, just this once, and see the architect laid bare.

His name is Andy Martin. I have looked him in the eyes. And I believe him when he says that he is proud of what he has started.

On the genealogy of shady morals

In an October 2007 article entitled “The New Right-Wing Smear Machine,” *The Nation's* Christopher Hayes sought to trace the electronic lineage of the Obama email. Hayes uncovered that the infamous email was a close paraphrase of an online column

written by right-wing activist Ted Sampley (of “Vietnam Veterans Against John Kerry” fame), who quoted extensively from a public statement made by Andy Martin in 2004. Martin’s statement appears to be the first published allegation that Obama has lied about his religion.

Just two weeks after Obama made his Keynote Address at the Democratic convention and rocketed into the national consciousness, Republican senatorial challenger Andy Martin held a series of news conferences in London and New York on August 10, 2004, asking Crown Books to pull all copies of Obama’s memoir *Dreams of My Father* from the shelves, on account of factual errors regarding Obama’s heritage. Among other things, Martin alleged that Obama was indoctrinated with Islamic values as a child, that his Kenyan family members were being hidden “in a closet somewhere” to conceal their religious beliefs, and (on an oddly unrelated note) that Obama’s father was a willing participant in Kenya’s bloody Mau Mau rebellion. The transcript of this speech lay dormant on the Internet for two years, until Sampley—inspired by prospects of Senator Obama running for the presidency—began using it as evidence in his piece entitled “Barack Hussein Obama: Who Is He?” for the US Veteran’s Dispatch website.

The original press release was classic Martin. The message was spoken before news cameras, printed in an online editorial and emailed to subscribers to Martin’s newsletter. Almost everything about Martin is refracted in this fashion. He is not simply a politician, nor is he a journalist. He is both, and neither. He has described himself at various times as an Internet journalist/broadcaster/critic/litigator/novelist/editor/foreign intelligence analyst/military security consultant/court reformer/corruption fighter/specialist in cyber war

tactics. And yes, he is all of those things too, and yet none of them.

The man of many faces

Martin’s personal history is as convoluted and strange as his self-affixed job title. Within the Illinois media, he is most famous for being a perennial candidate in numerous senatorial, gubernatorial, and presidential races. Most of his attempts have been spectacular failures. In 1992, his campaign reported earning only \$1,060 in donations, \$500 of which came from his own mother. In 2004, he lost out to Alan Keyes, who was drafted by the state GOP to ensure that someone precisely like Martin would not get the nomination. In 1998, he conducted Senatorial races in Illinois and Florida simultaneously, running under the pseudonym Anthony R. Martin-Trigona in Florida. In that race, he surprisingly carried Miami-Dade County “by a landslide” (his words) and ended up winning 33.6 percent of the statewide Florida GOP vote. By his own count, Martin has run in at least 20 campaigns throughout his lifetime. He has never won, nor has he ever come as close to victory as he did running under a fake name in a state in which he did not reside.

He is also a prolific Internet columnist, having published hundreds of editorials ranging from a detailed peace plan for the Middle East to a cringe-worthy lyrical ballad to Paris Hilton set to the tune of “You Are My Sunshine.” Following his initial article on Obama’s “Muslim roots,” Martin has published dozens more focusing on everything from Obama’s grandmother to his “dishonest” use of a teleprompter during his Iowa victory speech.

Reading his press releases, one gets the feeling that Martin runs for public office not to promote himself so much as to disparage everyone else. The man is an animal of dissent. He rages against everything, in all directions, and in nearly every medium (radio,

television, legal, electronic—all, it seems, except traditional print journalism). It was only a matter of time before his volley of arrows struck upon something or someone who mattered.

A portrait of the hack journalist as a young man

Seeing how often he has been burned by the local press, one would assume that Andy Martin would shy away from prying young journalists. This assumption turns out to be incorrect. Write an email to Andymart20@aol.com, at any time of the day, and I promise he will respond within hours. I began my correspondence with him in December 2007 with a series of blunt, angry emails addressing his baseless misrepresentation of Obama's religion. He responded promptly and viciously. After a brief, frothy back-and-forth, I told him that I enjoyed his candor, and respectfully requested an interview. Amazingly—considering the open hostility I had shown him just days before—he agreed.

The morning I was scheduled to drive into Chicago to meet with Martin, I opened my door to find that my dad (having read for years about Martin's antics in *The Chicago Tribune*) had placed outside my bedroom door one electric stun gun and one switchblade knife. Attached was a note: *Pick one*. The precaution was unwarranted. For all his flaws, Andy Martin is not known to be a violent man. But then again, Martin had served a brief stint on Riker's Island (for infuriating a judge and instigating some kind of bizarre courthouse brawl). Needless to say, I chose the switchblade.

Martin kept me waiting for two hours in the lobby of his posh Huron Avenue office building. He wouldn't allow me to come up to his office, but according to the security guard Martin really does rent an office space

and show up to work most days. (How he earns money is another great Martin mystery, since his website doesn't advertise and he doesn't have a second job. Many on the web suspect he still receives support from his mother.)

Just as I was beginning to suspect he had blown me off entirely, Martin stepped in from the bitter Chicago cold, wearing a knee-length Gore-Tex jacket and a wool hat and apologizing for his tardiness. With graying hair and a pink wind-chapped face, he was notably un-notable. The crazed, malign twinkle I had expected to see in his eye was entirely absent. He looked like nothing so much as a jolly first-time grandfather.

Over hot chocolates at a nearby Starbucks, I found that Martin was indeed jolly, almost calculatedly so. In a near-constant two-hour ebullient monologue (into which I had opportunity to insert only four questions, all of which he evaded), he regaled me with stories of single-handedly hunting for Saddam in Baghdad in 2003, his days chasing girls at the University of Illinois and how he was currently suing a reporter at the *Tribune* "just to drive him crazy." The impression I got was that this man, whose vicious rumor-mongering continues to dog the heels of a historic presidential candidate, was not a political mastermind so much as a merry prankster, like a child enraptured by his own ability to disrupt the adult world.

Who you callin' blogger?

Martin is quick to point out that he writes "editorials," not "blogs," and that there is an important difference. Indeed, something in Martin's tone and style makes it seem inaccurate to label his writing as blogwork. It would also be unfair to call it traditional journalism. To coin a term, what Martin practices could perhaps be called "iJournalism." With its Internet-only

platform, egoistic ('I' heavy) narrative style, and eschewal of the staples of old journalism—research, fact-checking, and objectivity—his brand of writing is perfectly suited to an intellectually lazy, gossip-hungry internet peruser. (The genre has its obvious antecedents, most notably in the work of Matt Drudge during the 1990's.) Martin brings to online journalism what Rush Limbaugh brought to radio or Michael Moore to film: sleek little stories that fit into larger political narratives, with all uncooperative details shaved away and any cracks filled in with the occasional white lie.

When asked to provide evidence that Obama practiced Islam as a child, Martin responded, "When you go to a gourmet restaurant, do you ask the chef for his recipes? Of course not." He went on: "My factual allegations about Obama have been vetted around the world and have held up. [Author's note: this is not true.] Where you lack insight is that you fail to understand how my worldwide and world-wise experience told me where to look and what to look for. Obama's people don't even dispute my facts. [Also untrue.] What distinguishes an artist from a hack is how we draw conclusions and whether those conclusions stand the test of time. Mine have."

Reinventing bullshit

Unreliable, opinion-based journalism is admittedly nothing new. It dates back to the yellow journalism of the 1880's and beyond. What's new is a structure of information distribution that allows an individual man, without the aid of any major media outlet, to reach so many and influence so much. By disguising his opinions within the aesthetic framework of a 'respectable' news website, Martin is able to garner journalistic authority that would normally be denied to a fringe reporter with unreliable sources (in other

words, a blogger). As traditional print journalists increasingly move from real-world research to web-based research, pieces of iJournalism are often picked up and used as textual evidence and inspiration for larger media narratives. In light of this trend, Martin seems more interested in having his story appropriated by media outlets than in bolstering his own readership.

In Martin's lexicon, the marker of success is "influence," the value of a piece of writing is "impact," the test of its authority, "vetting." Even if a particular article is later found to be false (as the *madrassa* scandal soon was), this does nothing to downgrade the influence of the iJournalist, because his name has become that much more recognizable. Martin's particular genius has been to provide a wealth of potential raw data for the media to stumble upon. Through the guises of politician, foreign affairs analyst, and attorney, Martin has been able to keep his name in the Chicago headlines with surprising success over the last 20 years. And since he writes the headlines on his website, Martin ensures that at least one headline a day bears his name.

Asked if whether his political aspirations were possibly tainting the objectivity of his reporting, Martin laughed and shook his head. "Objectivity?" he quipped incredulously. "There is no objectivity. There is just my opinion, and yours."

Politician or journalist. Prophet or prevaricator. Artist or hack. Sitting across the table from the wavering imago of Andy Martin, these distinctions don't just become blurred; they no longer seem worth drawing at all.